

## flashback, warm nights by OpheliaMarina

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**Summary:**

Mike isn't that great at cutting hair, and she can't tie a tie, and even now El still makes her kind of nervous, in small, soft ways.

(Post-season 2; preparations.)

## flashback, warm nights

### Author's Note:

dedicated to seph and phoebe and katie for really  
Bringing It in the 72 hour stranger things meltdown

“Are you absolutely sure you want me to do this?” Mike says. She’s been holding the scissors for so long they’ve gone just as clammy as she is. “I swear I’m not gonna be good at it.”

El doesn’t even bother opening her eyes, just says, “yes,” in what’s either an affirmation to Mike’s question or an agreement that she’s going to mess up, and settles more comfortably against the edge of the sink. Her hair is sticking to the wet spots in the basin, curling further into perfect, threatening ringlets.

Mike bites her lip, and switches hands with the scissors for the third time in two minutes. “I don’t know, maybe Hopper can cut it and I can-”

“Not allowed,” El says. “He’ll ruin it.”

“Or maybe Jonathan, she cut Nancy’s hair for her back in the spring, or, uh, Nancy even, she’d probably be better than-”

“Not allowed,” El says again. Her eyes are still closed, hands comfortably folded over her stomach. “Only you.”

Which is true. Hopper’s said too much traffic around the cabin will make El too noticeable, and they have to hide her a while longer; it took a long, screaming fight and El shattering one of the few remaining ceramic bowls in the shack to get him to agree to let even Mike come over. He acquiesced to sneaking El into the Wheeler house on Tuesdays and Saturdays, too, so she can see everyone else and help with their new campaign, but that’s it. There are still rules.

She’s about to say maybe they should wait till Tuesday, and Nancy can cut El’s hair for her in Mike’s sink at home, Mom won’t care *really* and Dad won’t notice, when Hopper’s voice rings out from the

other room, “And that’s a privilege and not a right, Wheeler! Remember that!”

Mike makes a face in his general direction, and the bathroom knob jitters, the door swinging a little bit back and forth.

“I see that,” Hopper yells, and there’s a faint, threatening rustle of newspaper. “Kid, that door’s staying open if you wanna keep enjoying these playdates.”

The door jiggles one more time, just to be contrary, but it stays open. Mike stops frowning at it to go back to anxiously looking at El’s head in the sink. “I don’t know, El, maybe-”

Finally, one of El’s eyes cracks open, and zeroes in on the scissors first, then Mike’s face. “*Mike.*”

“Fine, fine,” Mike says, and puts the scissors down to turn on the sink. Immediately all of El’s hair goes dark and flat, and she closes her eyes again. “But don’t be mad if it turns out weird.”

“I won’t be mad,” El says. “I promise.”

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Cutting hair isn’t actually that bad. Once El’s hair is wet and flat it becomes a lot less scary. It’s not that much to cut, either, it all drains down the sink when Mike’s done and then El’s even in the back, mostly.

“I brought-” Mike says, then gestures uselessly at the gel on the counter. El just nods, and keeps looking at Mike’s face. “The way, uh, your sister- Kali? The way she did it was cool. I thought maybe I could try to do that again. If you want.”

El nods. Having her hair back makes her eyes look bigger; Mike wonders if she could figure out the eye makeup Kali had done too, the deep dark circles that made El look badass instead of tired. What Nancy calls raccoon eyes but nicer. Mike reaches for the gel, and pushes El’s hair up off her face with the other hand. “The curly hair is cool, too, though. It’s pretty.”

That makes El smile a little bit, and she draws a lock of Mike's hair around one of her fingers as Mike starts rubbing the gel in. "Like yours."

It's true that if Mike doesn't brush her hair after she showers it comes out curly and crazy, but she has to brush it or Mom gives her a hard time, so. "Yeah, well. A little, I guess. I bet my parents would thank you to cut my hair back too."

El shakes her head. Her hand is still in Mike's hair, strands wrapped around her fingers. Her knuckles brush the underside of Mike's left ear. "No," she says. "It's nice long."

It's moments like this, words like this, that made Mike sick with herself for a year, for three hundred and fifty three days, over how much she missed Eleven, how much she had wanted her back. El's hand is still in her hair. Mike kind of wants to kiss her but her hands are still covered with gel and even if they weren't she doesn't think it would be even close to enough.

"It's a little too quiet in there!" Hopper shouts.

They both groan, and Mike goes back to slicking back El's hair and yells, "Stop listening to us!"

There's an indecipherable grumble, and then the sound of papers rustling again. Mike goes behind El to work on the ends. "Hey, um. I wanted to ask you something."

El turns her head to look back at her, and Mike gently pushes her cheek to bring her facing front again. "Ask me?"

"Yeah," Mike says, and frowns, trying to remember the way the tips of El's hair had fanned out. "Uh. So I know you're under house arrest still, but. Well. The Snow Ball, it's coming up at school. In December."

El's shoulders go stiff. Mike freezes, then finishes with the gel and wipes her hands off on her jeans. "I just thought, I mean. I promised you I would take you. And I still want to. If you still want to."

This time El stays still. Mike says, "I'm done, if you-" and she

immediately turns around to face Mike. She's smiling so big Mike doesn't even notice her tips have gone a little uneven in the back.

"I still want to," she says.

Mike exhales, and smiles back, and rubs her hands against her jeans again to make sure the rest of the gel is off. "Oh. Okay. Cool. So- do you think you can?"

El frowns thoughtfully, then glances at the door before leaning in close. "I'll ask," she says, conspiratory, sly.

She grins back at her for a moment, then asks, seriously, "Nicely?"

It takes her a long moment of deep consideration, and Mike's about to say there's only so many plates to break left in the cabin, soon they'll have to eat off the table, before she says, grudgingly, "Nicely."

Mike nods, and extends her pinky. El stares at it blankly, and Mike motions for her hand. "We shake them," she says. "For promises. It's like spit, but Max won't do spit with us because she thinks it's gross, and honestly it is, so we're switching."

They shake pinkies, slowly. Then Mike retracts, and glances towards the mirror. "You can look now. And tell me if you hate it, because Nancy can fix it when you come over on Tuesday. Don't say you like it just to be nice."

Giving her a skeptical look, El straightens up and turns to the mirror. Her eyes narrow, inspecting herself, and she turns from left to right, touching carefully at the edges.

Suddenly Mike is hyperaware of her leg bouncing. It takes real force of will to make herself stop. "Is it okay?"

El smiles at her reflection, lifting her chin a little to examine the back of her neck. "Bitchin'," she says, formally.

And Mike laughs, and laughs, until the sound of it becomes kind of high pitched and wheezy and embarrassing, and she reaches for El's hand again, just to hold this time.

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Dad doesn't believe Mike when she says she has to go the Snow Ball because she's meeting someone there. Nancy's shocked Mike even had the initiative to say she was in the first place.

Mike just keeps picking her chicken apart with the flat end of her knife. "You don't have to *believe* me," she says crabbily. "I'm just saying. I need a ride to the school that night."

There's a pregnant pause, and Dad opens his mouth again, and Nancy says, "I'll take Mike."

Everyone looks at her, and Mike drops her knife. Holly coos in her booster seat.

Mom says, "Oh, Nancy, you don't have to. I'm sure you have--"

"No, it's okay," Nancy says. "Actually, I was thinking about chaperoning anyway. Jonathan's going to be there taking pictures, so. They still need people, and."

But Mom's already smiling dopily. Nancy supposes it has to be a good thing that Mom likes Jonathan so much, because it lets her get away with more than she could when she was dating Steve, but mostly it's just embarrassing. "Oh, well," she says. "If Jonathan's going to be there, then that sounds lovely. And Michael! Look at you! I was afraid last year when you didn't go that your nice jacket- the brown one? I was so afraid it would go to waste. Oh, Ted, you'll have to teach him how to tie a tie."

"That's okay," Mike mutters, and picks up her knife again to stab it all the way through the rest of the chicken breast.

Undeterred, Mom grabs Mike's other wrist and pulls her up. "No way out of it, young man. Let's go see if it still fits you, all right? If it doesn't I can run on down to Stacy's and ask if she--"

Mike shoots Nancy a panicked look, and Nancy puts down her own fork, carefully, and wipes her mouth with the napkin. "No, Mom, come on, I--"

"That's a good idea, actually," Nancy says, and stands up too. Mike shoots her a look of utmost betrayal, and Nancy shakes her head discreetly, points up at the ceiling. "I'm just gonna- I'm gonna go look at my own dresses, pick something out. Mike, come up when you're done with Mom, all right? So we can, uh. Figure out times and stuff."

At least a little bit of the tension goes out of Mike's shoulders, and she gives Nancy a terse nod. Nancy winks back, waits thirty seconds after Mom whisks Mike into the living room, and heads upstairs.

El's lying upside down on Nancy's bed, scanning through her copy of *To The Lighthouse* and wearing one of Hopper's enormous flannels, and she waits until Nancy's double-locked her door to turn over and sit up. "Did Mike ask?"

"Yep," Nancy says, sitting down on the bed next to her and giving her a careful once over. Mike actually did a good job with her hair, which, considering all the anxious whining about cutting it Nancy had to endure beforehand, is more of an annoyance than a relief. "If you get the go ahead from Hopper you guys will be all set."

The more time Nancy spends with El, the more El becomes a sweet young thing instead of a atomic bomb. She absolutely glows, pulling her bare knees into her chest and beaming at Nancy, and for the nine millionth time Nancy has to wonder what this kid sees in Mike. Nancy loves Mike, sure, but Mike can also be kind of an asshole.

Still, it's objectively better to have two kids happy than Mike miserable and bratty and stealing change out of Nancy's underwear drawer all the time. Nancy nudges El a little, and El sways with the movement. "Hey. You want to pick out an outfit with me?"

El nods so hard all her curls bounce at once, and Nancy laughs.

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An hour later, Mom's still downstairs forcing Mike into a suit and tie, and Nancy and El have narrowed their search down to five dresses, spread out on the bed in spread-eagled succession. Two for Nancy, three for Eleven, and they're both standing over the bed with their arms crossed in near perfect parallel.

“Okay, El,” Nancy says. “Outsider opinion. Purple one or white one for me?”

El frowns hard at both of them, and leans down close to examine the fabric, the color. She runs long, careful fingers over the skirts of both, gives Nancy a long, critical look, then straightens back up. “Purple.”

And it’s hard to argue with that kind of assessment, especially considering she’s psychic. “Purple it is,” she says, and hangs the white dress back up. “What are you feeling, kiddo? If you want more options, I can go find my spring stuff.”

The crease in El’s forehead deepens, and she shakes her head, giving the remaining three dresses a long, cold stare. There’s the old blue one Nancy had worn to her first Snow Ball laid out, a thin pink one that had reminded Nancy of the one Mike had stolen for El to wear last year, and a white one, just because maybe the snow theme is something El wants to keep on tap.

The silent staring goes on for so long Nancy starts to get kind of fidgety. “Do you, um. Is there a color you like?”

That sends El on another long, motionless thought spiral, and Nancy’s about to say maybe they should go rescue Mike from Mom and get a third opinion when finally El says, tentatively, “Blue.”

“Okay!” Nancy says, sounding less encouraging and more relieved than she meant to. “Okay, blue one. Do you want to try it on?”

Quickly, El shakes her head, still staring at the dress, and Nancy pauses again, unsure. El reaches out, fingertips against the skirt, the ribbon around the waist. Her lips are drawn tight together, and there’s a mix of fascination and aversion in her expression that Nancy can’t really decipher.

So she takes her best guess. “Um, El. You don’t have to wear a dress to the dance, actually. No one’s gonna make you.”

El’s gaze snaps onto her face, hand still frozen in the air above the dress. She doesn’t say anything, still, but her eyes have become headlights.



“Yeah,” Nancy says, spurred on by her silence, “yeah. No one’s going to make you wear a skirt. It’s the eighties. We’re in the new wave. You could wear, um. Dress pants or something. Whatever you want. Whatever feels good.”

Slowly, El’s hand curls back in on herself. She glances back down at the dress, conflicted, and Nancy doesn’t really know what to say about girls in pants other than she’s pretty sure El could wear a potato sack and Mike would start crying at the sight of her regardless.

And maybe it’s just the blue, so she says, “Hey. You know what you should do, though?”

“What?”

“No matter what you end up wearing, try to match it with Mike,” Nancy says. “At least a little. The color of the tie and the color of the dress, or like. Whatever works for you guys.” Smiling a little, picking up the purple dress again to hold it against herself, she swishes the skirt back and forth. “Girls like it when you do that.”

“Girls like it,” El repeats, under her breath, half question and half answer.

As if on cue, there’s a one-two-three rap on the door, and a breathless shout from Mike outside. “It’s me, let me in!”

Nancy hurries over, unlocks the door, and stands aside for Mike to barrel in. She’s all frazzled, hair standing on edge, and she’s crammed into a nice tan jacket a size too small with a tie choked up around her neck.

She’s loosening it, half red from strain and half from embarrassment, when El says, “pretty,” and both the Wheelers look over at her. She’s smiling at Mike, soft, the dress on the bed entirely forgotten.

“Don’t be a *jerk*,” Mike says, but she smiles back at El with so much fondness Nancy’s tempted to vacate the premises before she remembers this is her own room. “I look like an idiot, I feel like my arms are suffocating. This would probably fit you better than me.”

Nancy’s about to agree with her, but then Mike pauses, half-wriggled

out of the jacket and distracted by El shifting in place, by the flash of blue on the bed. “Oh, is that- that’s pretty. Nancy, are you gonna let her borrow something?”

She’s forcing her other arm out of the jacket sleeve when it all sort of clicks together in Nancy’s head. “Um,” she says. “I mean, I can. But maybe you should?”

“*Blue*,” El says behind her, relieved, as if everything suddenly makes sense.

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“Okay,” Dustin says, and scratches at his scalp defensively. “I don’t get how you guys can be giving me shit about *my* hair and not get on Mike about hers.”

“Uh, because Mike’s hair is *like that*,” Lucas says. “And it looks fine. Your hair looks like you personally scalped Farrah Fawcett.”

Will snorts, quiet enough to be polite about it. Mike smothers a laugh into her elbow. Dustin scowls at both of them, and consciously smooths his mane back again.

Nancy’s dress is a little wrinkled in the front, because Mike had to stuff it in her bag to change in the bathroom, and a little wet in the back from where she dunked her head under the sink, but other than that it fits better than Mike or Nancy had thought it would. Her hair is curled up at the back of her neck, and she’s barefoot, and the gym’s a hundred degrees like it always is but for the first time in ages it doesn’t make Mike feel dizzy to be in here. “You look good, Dustin, I swear. It’s just, uh. Different.”

“Yeah, yeah, shithheads,” Dustin says, still pouting, then he gives a long sigh, seems to make himself get over it with effort, and says, “Well. You guys all look cool. But if Mike gets to curl her hair than so do I.”

Lucas opens his mouth again, but Mike cuts across him. “Fair,” she says. Then, “I like your bow tie.”

That makes Dustin brighten up, but at least he doesn’t purr. He and

Lucas disappear in pursuit of Max, who's off somewhere probably picking a fight with some poor chaperone, and Will nudges Mike's ankle with his foot.

"Hey," he says, quietly. He still isn't speaking higher than a mutter most days, but he's almost back to his normal color, his normal temperature. The normal kind of smile he gives. "You look really pretty."

Kind of bashful, Mike adjusts the shoulders of the dress. "Thanks. It's kind of itchy. You look good too. Did Jonathan--"

But Will interrupts, breaking eye contact and standing on tiptoes to look over Mike's shoulder. "She's here."

Mike turns so fast she forgets she's not wearing shoes and almost falls over. Will puts a hand up to her elbow, steadying, and she catches herself, takes a deep breath, looks up and sees El.

And she *sees* El.

Nancy had been right about letting El borrow her jacket. It's so much better a fit. Her hair's slicked back, like Mike had done the first time after cutting it, and she's wearing what must be a dress shirt she borrowed from one of the boys and pants and a tie in a crude, loose Hopperish knot around her neck. She stops in the doorway of the gym, just looking at Mike, and Mike feels like she should be the one to go to her but there's a moment where she just wants to stand there and look at her, so she does.

They reach each other at the same time, and for a moment they just keep looking. El's the first one able to talk. "You look beautiful."

"*You* look beautiful," Mike says. "Wow. Um. Wow."

Smiling, El lifts up one wrist. A blue band slides down her wrist. "Blue," she says. "We match."

"Oh," Mike says, and grins back, because yeah they do. "Did Nancy tell you to do that?"

And El nods eagerly. "Girls like it," she says, with such solemnity that

Mike has to bite back on a laugh.

“That’s true,” she says. “It’s nice. Um. Do you want to dance?”

The pleased expression on El’s face fades into something close to worry. She half nods, then says, uncertainly, “I don’t know how.”

“I don’t either,” Mike says, and that’s true. “Do you wanna figure it out?”

**Author's Note:**

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